

Katyn massacre

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katyn_massacre

This article is about the 1940 massacre of Polish officers. For the 1943 massacre of Belarusian civilians, see [Khatyn massacre](#).



Katyn-Kharkiv-Mednoye memorial in [Świętokrzyskie Mountains](#), Poland



Map of the sites related to the Katyn massacre

The **Katyn massacre** ([Polish](#): *zbrodnia katyńska, mord katyński*, "Katyń crime"; [Russian](#): Катынский расстрел *Katynskij ra'sstrel*, "Katyn shooting") was a series of mass executions of [Polish](#) nationals carried out by the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs ([NKVD](#)), the [Soviet](#) secret police, in April and May 1940. Originally the term "Katyn massacre", also known as the **Katyn Forest massacre**, referred to the massacre at Katyn Forest, which was discovered first and was the largest execution of this type.

The massacre was prompted by NKVD chief [Lavrentiy Beria](#)'s proposal to execute all captive members of the Polish Officer Corps, dated 5 March 1940, approved by the [Soviet Politburo](#), including its leader, [Joseph Stalin](#). The number of victims is estimated at about 22,000.^[1] The

victims were executed in the [Katyn](#) Forest in Russia, the [Kalinin](#) and [Kharkiv](#) prisons, and elsewhere. Of the total killed, about 8,000 were officers [taken prisoner](#) during the [1939 Soviet invasion of Poland](#), another 6,000 were police officers, and the rest were arrested [Polish intelligentsia](#) the Soviets deemed to be "[intelligence agents](#), [gendarmes](#), landowners, saboteurs, factory owners, lawyers, officials and priests".^[1]

The government of [Nazi Germany](#) announced the discovery of mass graves in the Katyn Forest in 1943. When the London-based [Polish government-in-exile](#) asked for an investigation by the [International Red Cross](#), Stalin immediately severed diplomatic relations with it. The USSR claimed the victims had been murdered by the Nazis in 1941, and continued to deny responsibility for the massacres until 1990, when it officially acknowledged and condemned the perpetration of the killings by the NKVD, as well as the subsequent cover-up by the [Soviet government](#).^{[1][2][3][a]}

An investigation conducted by the [Prosecutor General's](#) Office of the Soviet Union (1990–1991) and the [Russian Federation](#) (1991–2004) confirmed Soviet responsibility for the massacres, but refused to classify this action as a [war crime](#) or an act of [genocide](#). The investigation was closed on the grounds that the perpetrators of the atrocity were already dead, and since the Russian government would not classify the dead as victims of Stalinist repression, [formal posthumous rehabilitation](#) was deemed inapplicable.^[4]

In November 2010 the Russian [State Duma](#) approved a declaration blaming Stalin and other Soviet officials for having personally ordered the massacre

Quarters 165
Ft Lewis, Washington
11 May, 1950

Subject: THE KATYN CASE

To : F.L. PARKS,
Major General, USA
Chief of Information

file
@

1. Pursuant to your letter of 26 Apr 1950 (incl # 1) I am personally typing this report of my recollections concerning the KATYN Case. I am retaining one carbon copy for my personal file.

2. Since five years have elapsed since I made the first report to Maj Gen Bissell, this report will have to omit some details such as names which I have forgotten. In order to assist in locating my original report here are the circumstances under which it was made:

On 22 May 1945 Gen Bissell discussed the case with me alone in his private office in the Pentagon for about 20 minutes. He decided that it was important and directed his civilian female assistant (secretary ? stenographer?) to go with me to closed room across the hall and take dictation. I dictated my report, she typed it up and we added the photographs as inclosures. The General read the finished report, directed that it be marked "Top Secret" and filed. He then dictated the letter directing me to silence, and had me sign a copy of it in his presence. He explained the importance of my remaining silent, gave me my copy of the letter and thanked me.

3. Narrative: I was a prisoner of war at Oflag IX/AZ in Rotenburg, Germany in April, 1943. It was primarily a British Officers prison camp headed by Brigadier Nicholson (who had been the defender of CALAIS) I was the senior of the 125 (approx) American officers in the camp. At this time the German press began a big splurge on the KATYN case. So also did the German radio.

(note: mention of this radio violates the certificate I had to sign upon being processed as a returned POW)

Hauptman HEYL the German camp commander, told Brig Nicholson and me that he had orders to send two American officers and 1 Brit. officer to the RR station at KASSEL, Germany where they would be met by British Maj Gen FORTUNE (from another nearby POW camp. He had commanded the Brit 1st Div in France)

Incl 1

Par. 3, Narrative, Continued:

Hauptman Heyl stated that I would be one of the two U.S. officers; that I would select the other one; that together with other Allied prisoners we would be a "Board of Inquiry" to investigate the Katyn Massacre. I flatly refused to have any part of it. Brig. Nicholson backed me up on this and together we wrote a letter to the Swiss Protecting Power which stated that no officers from the camp would make any visit to Katyn or make any investigation, or express any opinion. That if we were forced to go it would be only as individual prisoners under guard and against our protest. That we could not be considered as representatives of the prison camp, our army, or our nation, and that we protested violently this apparent attempt to use us for German Propaganda Purposes.

Our protest did no good. Using armed guards, the Germans took me and Capt Donald Stewart, FA (regular army) to the Kassel RR station where they expected to meet Maj Gen Fortune. He did not arrive, to the surprise of the German guards. We were then taken to Berlin and jailed in an Arbeits Kommando (sp?) -- a building overlooking the Spree River, housing PWs of several nationalities who were performing labor in Berlin.

In this jail we met several U.S. soldiers who had been brought from a nearby PW camp for the same reason that we had. One of these *was a CPL TAUSSIG who had been in the same regiment with me for the invasion of ALGIERS by the 168th Inf. There were also several british soldiers and a british civilian(internee) as well as ✓LT COL STEVENSON (british, South African, Sig corps) and a british captain, medical corps, whose name I cannot now remember. In my opinion these men were actually what they appeared to be and did not include any "plants". We prisoners of war were very careful in our efforts to make certain identification.

Soon we were taken, one by one, to the jail office where we were interviewed by several German staff officers and some civilian officials who appeared to be from both the foreign office and the propaganda ministry. The procedure appeared about the same for all of us: "Since you have volunteered to investigate this terrible Katyn atrocity, we are taking you to the scene. You will of course sign a parole not to escape."

"The hell we did volunteer. We dont want to go. Send us back to our camps." Great suprise and much chatter among the Germans. Then the same thing over again.

Finally they announced that since we wouldnt give our paroles they would have to place guards on the airplane with us. This meant that some prisoners would not make the trip, to make room for the guards. The American soldiers were left back.

** I knew Taussig personally.

✓ Lt Col Stevenson was from the same camp as Capt Stewart and myself. He had come to Berlin with us. We knew him.

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Par 3, Narrative, continued.

Lt Col Stevenson was the senior in the group. We cautioned the entire group to do no talking, to give no indications of opinion, and not to cooperate in any way with the Germans. All agreed. It was evident to all of us that we were involved in an international mess with terrific political implications.

An english-speaking german captain was placed in charge of the group together with an english speaking Sonderfuhrer (sp?) who gave the name of Von Johnson, spoke idiomatic American, and said he had attended school at Rice in the USA.

We were flown from Templehof to Smolensk about the 6th of May, 1943. At that time Smolensk was about 60 miles from the front and appeared to contain only garrison troops. We were billeted in some of the remaining intact buildings, of which there were only a few. Some sort of a German service unit maintained an officers mess where we all ate. While in Smolensk we were taken on a sight-seeing tour by the local service unit commander and a major who appeared to be an agricultural expert and enthusiast who was trying to re-habilitate the land with the remnants of the Russian peasant population. His efforts included a model village. In my opinion this "hospitality" was spontaneous and was prompted partly by his own enthusiasm for his work and partly because he hadn't had many visitors. It didn't appear to be organized on orders from Berlin.

A German Lt (spoke no English) appeared from the group that was in charge of operations at the scene of the Mass Graves in KATYN Forest. He acted as our guide. We were driven to the site where there was a gate, guarded by young soldiers in Polish uniforms. A sickly-sweet odor of decaying bodies was everywhere. At the graves it was nearly overpowering. There were several graves. Professor Herr Doktor BUTZ (BOOTZ ?) a German expert in forensic medicine was present together with other technicians. Several Polish Red Cross workers were present. Civilian labor was being used to remove bodies from the graves. Each body was searched very carefully, examined, identified, and re-buried in a nearby mass grave which was to become a national shrine with suitable monuments. The articles removed from each body were placed in a large manilla envelope for safekeeping. The search of the bodies was very thorough, including removal of shoes or boots where it was possible. (Sometimes the whole leg from the knee down came off with the boot) The examiners wore rubber aprons and rubber gloves. A typist was present recording the findings on each body.

We followed our guide right into each of the graves--stepping on bodies that were piled like cord wood, face down usually, to a depth of about 5 to 7 bodies covered with about 5 feet of earth. About 300 bodies were laid out beside one of the graves. These all had their hands tied behind them with cord. The rest appeared not to have been tied. All bodies had a bullet hole in the back of head near the neck with the exit wound of the bullet being in the forehead or front upper part of the skull.

Par 3, Narrative, continued:

The graves on the down-hill part of the slope were more moist than the others. One end of one grave had standing water in it. German photographers were present and took both still and motion pictures of our party while we inspected the graves. Copies of the still pictures were later given to us. We never saw or heard anything of the movies.

After we inspected the graves we were shown several other test holes which had been dug in the vicinity, together with very old human bones, ie, no meat left on them, which were said to have been dug up there. I am inclined to believe the story, although there was no proof. The Germans made much of the fact that this wooded knoll was a long-standing burial site used by the Russian secret police. I forget whether they called them the OGPU, NKVD, or MVD. There was a rustic lodge on the low bluff overlooking the small landing on the river (Dnieper river, I believe). This lodge was allegedly the scene of frequent tortures, drinking parties, and various other orgies held by the Russian police as matters of amusement and recreation as well as routine business. The Germans produced an old peasant, Russian, who claimed that this forest of Katyn had an evil reputation -- it was forbidden ground -- that he had seen big closed vans go from the railroad siding (some miles distant) into the forest and that there were stories of shots being heard very often in the woods. This was supposed to confirm that the Russians had brought the victims to the mass graves by rail and truck some time before the Germans occupied the area.

The British medical captain in the group understood German very well and a little Russian which he had learned while taking care of Russian prisoners.

About a mile down the road the Germans had taken over a house as a field museum and office. The porch and front rooms were filled with glass showcases containing items removed from bodies in the graves. There were sample uniform insignia ranging from General to Lieutenant, there were several Geneva arm bands, many letters, photographs, diaries, news clippings, personal souvenirs etc. These items were just the better samples. In the back rooms of the house there were the individual envelopes containing the items removed from the corpses. This building was also permeated with the smell of the graves, coming from the showcases and the envelopes.

At this point the Germans produced two small drinks for everyone and then we returned to our billets in Smolensk.

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Par 3, Narrative, continued:

We were flown back to the same Jail in Berlin and stayed there about 10 days. During this time the Germans were apparently trying to decide what to do with us. (The British soldiers and the civilian internee were returned to their respective camps before the end of this ten day period-- or so we were told-- leaving us four officers to wonder what it was all about. An English speaking German soldier or Sonderfuhrer Von Johnson would take us for walk through the Tiergarten every day, along with guards. It was during this walk period that we had a chance to talk without fear of microphones. Our discussion while in the Jail always avoided any mention of what we thought about who had committed the murders at Katyn.

During these walks, Lt Col Stevenson did a lot of talking with the Germans. Told them that he had once published a book and that as soon as he returned home he was going to get permission from his superiors to write a book about this experience. We couldn't get him to shut up about any subject at any time except the big question of "Whodunnit ?" He was a windbag. He claimed to be a member of a group of amateur investigators of the supernatural. He even carried a feather in his wallet which he said was from the headdress of the American Indian Chief (spirit) whom he had contacted through a medium in S. Africa.

We gathered from the Germans that the front office didn't know what to do with us. There was some hopeful implication that we might be released, possibly through Spain.

One afternoon Lt Col Stevenson was bundled off by the Germans on about ten minutes notice. He seemed very surprised and quite uneasy as he left the Jail. We never saw or heard of him again. That night Capt Stewart and I were returned to our original prison camp, where we were met by Hauptman Heyl. We asked him what kind of a story he had told us about going to meet Maj Gen Fortune. He replied that Fortune had been seriously ill with bronchitis.

(I later met Maj Gen Fortune and he had not been sick at all)

Insert----- Prior to leaving Berlin we were told that Germany had not and would not make any propaganda use of our visit to the graves or the pictures taken of the visit. I have never heard of their doing so.

Throughout the rest of our time in prison camps Capt Stewart and I refused to discuss our experiences concerning Katyn and never stated what opinion we had formed.

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Par. 3, Narrative, continued:

I reached the American lines in the sector of the 104th Inf Div near Duben, Germany at the MULDE River line on 5 May 1945, still carrying the photographs given me at KATYN.

I showed the photographs to G-2 of the 104th Div.

(I had previously showed these to only one other person apart from the German prison camp security personnel who conducted periodic searches, but always allowed me to keep the photographs because they had been stamped "Gepuft". This other person was Col Thomas D. Drake, Senior officer in Oflag 64 who was repatriated for stomach ulcers. Before he left the prison camp to be repatriated Capt Stewart and I talked with him, showed him the pictures and asked that he report the matter to the War Dept. He laughed at me and said that I had been taken in completely by the German Propaganda Experts. I don't know if he ever mentioned the matter when he reached the States.)

G-2 of the 104th Div recognized that my report was one of interest to both the State and War Depts and provided transportation to Hq VII Corps in Leipzig. General J. Lawton Collins then commanded the VII Corps.

Gen Collins (who has known me since I was a child) discussed the matter with me and set the necessary wheels in motion to get me back to the Pentagon with all haste.

In Paris I stayed with Gen Barker and at his suggestion discussed the matter with a full colonel (whose name I have forgotten) connected with War Crimes Investigations. He decided it was a matter for the War Dept and the State Dept and took no action.

COL DRAKE, GEN COLLINS, GEN BISSELL, AND GEN BISSELLS STENOGRAPHER ARE THE ONLY PERSONS I HAVE EVER TOLD OF MY CONCLUSIONS CONCERNING WHO MURDERED THE POLISH OFFICERS AT KATYN. (except, of course, the other members of the party who visited the site with me)

4. CONCLUSIONS: I believe that the Russians did it.
The rest of the group that visited the site stated to me that they believed that the Russians did it. (Capt, now Major, Donald Stewart, FA, can be asked to verify this. I don't know his present address. He is regular army.)

5. Discussion:

At the beginning of the newspaper publicity concerning KATYN I believed the whole thing to be one huge, well managed, desperate lie by the Germans to split the Western Allies from Russia.

I hated the Germans. I didn't want to believe them.

At that time, like many others, I more or less believed that Russia could get along with us.

When I became involved in the visit to KATYN I realized that the Germans would do their best to convince me that Russia was guilty. I made up my mind not to be convinced by what must be a propaganda effort.

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Par 5, Discussion, continued:

The apparent weak spot in the German story was the fact that Germany had occupied the ground around Smolensk for a long time before announcing the discovery of the graves. (The exact dates are a matter of record. I don't have the facilities to look them up for entry in this report)

I wanted to believe that whole thing was a frame-up. Could these be bodies from an extermination camp, dressed as Polish officers and "planted"?

Could the letters, diaries, identification tags, news clippings -- all be forgeries?

What about the state of decomposition of the bodies? Did it appear to agree with the German story of when they must have been buried? After all, I'm no expert on body-decomposition. What about the temperature, moisture, soil bacteria?

What about the German statements that Polish families had been trying to locate their relatives, known to have been imprisoned when Russia occupied part of Poland? Was it true that these Polish relatives ceased to get answers from their imprisoned relatives -- that a cloak of mystery descended all at once?

Where is PROOF of who killed these men? Who saw it done?

And so on and so on----- I tried every way I knew how to avoid believing that Russia had done it. I tried every way to convince myself that the Germans had done it. I wanted to believe that the Germans had done it.

Since the graves were already opened when we were there, it was not possible to see for ourselves what sort of growth had existed on top of the graves, in order to see how long the graves had existed. And if we had been present, how could we know that the Germans hadn't cleverly transplanted older bushes to give the appearance of age to the graves?

So you see that we pursued every line of attack to weaken the German story and avoid the conclusion that the Russians had done the killing. It was only with great reluctance that I decided finally that it must be true; that for once the Germans weren't lying; that the facts were as claimed by the Germans. I have thought about this a lot in the past seven years, and freely admit that there never was presented to me any single piece of evidence that could be taken as an absolute proof. But the sum of circumstantial evidence, impressions formed at the time of looking at the graves, what I saw in people's faces--- all forces the conclusion that Russia did it.

The uniforms on the bodies were obviously of the best material and tailor made. The footwear appeared to be of the best and included many pairs that were obviously made to order. The uniforms and footwear all were obviously well-fitted. This convinced me that the bodies were truly those of Polish officers. The degree of wear on the clothing and particularly the wear on the shoes led me to believe that these officers had been dead a long time, otherwise the shoes and clothing would show much more wear. This was a point that was not called to our attention by the Germans. It is one of the strongest arguments by which to fix the date of the killing.

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6. Last summer I received some letters from Mr MONTGOMERY M. GREEN. I wrote the Dept of the Army for instructions on how to reply to Mr Green. In order to clear my files and possibly to be of assistance to Captain Semple, I am enclosing some papers marked : "MONTGOMERY GREEN and related papers"

/signed/ John H. Van Vliet Jr

JOHN H VAN VLIET JR
LT COL., 23d Infantry.

Incl # 1: Ltr, Request for Intel. Rpt. Gen Parks to Lt Col V.V.

Incl # 2: "MONTGOMERY GREEN and related papers"

Incl # 3: Cert. true cpy, Directive from Gen Bissell to Lt Col V.V.

